

Russian fairy tale



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Snowflake



Once upon a time there lived a peasant called Ivan, and he had a wife whose name was Marie. They would have been quite happy except for one thing they had no children to play with, and as they were now old people they did not find that watching the children of their neighbours at all made up to them for having one of their own.



One winter, which nobody living will ever forget, the snow lay so deep that it came up to the knees of even the tallest man. When it had all fallen, and the sun was shining again, the children ran out into the street to play, and the old man and his wife sat at their window and gazed at them.



The children first made a sort of little terrace, and stamped it hard and firm, and then they began to make a snow woman. Ivan and Marie watched them, the while thinking about many things.



Suddenly Ivan's face brightened, and, looking at his wife, he said, 'Wife, why shouldn't we make a snow woman too?'



‘Why not?’ replied Marie, who happened to be in a very good temper; ‘it might amuse us a little. But there is no use making a woman. Let us make a little snow child, and pretend it is a living one.’

‘Yes, let us do that,’ said Ivan, and he took down his cap and went into the garden with his old wife.

Then the two set to work with all their might to make a doll out of the snow. They shaped a little body and two little hands and two little feet. On top of all they placed a ball of snow, out of which the head was to be.



'What in the world are you doing?' asked a passer-by.

'Can't you guess?' returned Ivan.

'Making a snow-child,' replied Marie.

They had finished the nose and the chin. Two holes were left for the eyes, and Ivan carefully shaped out the mouth.



No sooner had he done so than he felt a warm breath upon his cheek. He started back in surprise and looked—and behold! the eyes of the child met his, and its lips, which were as red as raspberries, smiled at him!



'What is it?' cried Ivan, crossing himself. 'Am I mad, or is the thing bewitched?'

The snow-child bent its head as if it had been really alive. It moved its little arms and its little legs in the snow that lay about it just as the living children did theirs.

'Ah! Ivan, Ivan,' exclaimed Marie, trembling with joy, 'heaven has sent us a child at last!' And she threw herself upon Snowflake (for that was the snow-child's name) and covered her with kisses. And the loose snow fell away from Snowflake as an egg shell does from an egg, and it was a little girl whom Marie held in her arms.

'Oh! my darling Snowflake!' cried the old woman, and led her into the cottage.



And Snowflake grew fast; each hour as well as each day made a difference, and every day she became more and more beautiful. The old couple hardly knew how to contain themselves for joy, and thought of nothing else. The cottage was always full of village children, for they amused Snowflake, and there was nothing in the world they would not have done to amuse her. She was their doll, and they were continually inventing new dresses for her, and teaching her songs or playing with her. Nobody knew how clever she was! She noticed everything, and could learn a lesson in a moment. Anyone would have taken her for thirteen at least! And, besides all that, she was so good and obedient; and so pretty, too! Her skin was as white as snow, her eyes as blue as forget-me-nots, and her hair was long and golden. Only her cheeks had no colour in them, but were as fair as her forehead.



So the winter went on, till at last the spring sun mounted higher in the heavens and began to warm the earth. The grass grew green in the fields, and high in the air the larks were heard singing. The village girls met and danced in a ring, singing, 'Beautiful spring, how came you here? How came you here? Did you come on a plough, or was it a harrow?' Only Snowflake sat quite still by the window of the cottage.

'What is the matter, dear child?' asked Marie. 'Why are you so sad? Are you ill or have they treated you unkindly?'

'No,' replied Snowflake, 'it is nothing, mother; no one has hurt me; I am well.'



The spring sun had chased away the last snow from its hiding place under the hedges; the fields were full of flowers; nightingales sang in the trees, and all the world was gay. But the gayer grew the birds and the flowers the sadder became Snowflake. She hid herself from her playmates, and curled herself up where the shadows were deepest, like a lily amongst its leaves. Her only pleasure was to lie amid the green willows near some sparkling stream. At the dawn and at twilight only she seemed happy. When a great storm broke, and the earth was white with hail, she became bright and joyous as the Snowflake of old; but when the clouds passed, and the hail melted beneath the sun, Snowflake would burst into tears and weep as a sister would weep over her brother.



The spring passed, and it was the eve of St. John, or Midsummer Day. This was the greatest holiday of the year, when the young girls met in the woods to dance and play. They went to fetch Snowflake, and said to Marie 'Let her come and dance with us.'

But Marie was afraid; she could not tell why, only she could not bear the child to go. Snowflake did not wish to go either, but they had no excuse ready. So Marie kissed the girl and said 'Go, my Snowflake, and be happy with your friends, and you, dear children, be careful of her. You know she is the light of my eyes to me.'



‘Oh, we will take care of her,’ cried the girls gaily, and they ran off to the woods. There they wore wreaths, gathered nosegays, and sang songs some sad, some merry. And whatever they did Snowflake did too.



When the sun set they lit a fire of dry grass, and placed themselves in a row, Snowflake being the last of all. 'Now, watch us,' they said, 'and run just as we do.'



And they all began to sing and to jump one after another across the fire.

Suddenly, close behind them, they heard a sigh, then a groan. 'Ah!' They turned hastily and looked at each other. There was nothing.



They looked again. Where was Snowflake? She has hidden herself for fun, they thought, and searched for her everywhere. 'Snowflake! Snowflake!' But there was no answer. 'Where can she be Oh, she must have gone home.' They returned to the village, but there was no Snowflake.



For days after that they sought her high and low. They examined every bush and every hedge, but there was no Snowflake. And long after everyone else had given up hope Ivan and Marie would wander through the woods crying 'Snowflake, my dove, come back, come back!' And sometimes they thought they heard a call, but it was never the voice of Snowflake.

And what had become of her? Had a fierce wild beast seized her and dragged her into his lair in the forest? Had some bird carried her off across the wide blue sea?

No, no beast had touched her, no bird had borne her away. With the first breath of flame that swept over her when she ran with her friends Snowflake had melted away, and a little soft haze floating upwards was all that remained of her.